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SUBJECT: MIXED MIGRATION FLOWS: IOM/UNHCR CONFERENCE IN
BAHAMAS

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SUMMARY

1. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) co-hosted the second annual regional seminar in Nassau, The Bahamas on November 8-12, 2004. Entitled "Contingency Planning for Mixed Migratory Flows in the Caribbean: Effective Practices and Tools for the Future", the conference touched on migration issues such as contingency planning, registration of migrants, medical screening, and refugee status determination as they pertain to the region. Perhaps the biggest accomplishment of the seminar was to have most country representatives express not only the desirability but also the urgency to have contingency plans for mass migration in place. End Summary

Mass Migration Plans

2. Delegates from twenty countries in the Caribbean came together to discuss common concerns and share ideas for contingency planning efforts in case of a potential mass migration due to political crisis or disaster-related emergencies in the area. The seminar brought together natural disaster planners, officials from immigration and foreign ministries of 20 Caribbean countries, and UNHCR "honorary liaisons," as well as representatives from observer countries. Participants found that the problems and issues on mass migration and natural disaster planning discussed during the first conference in December 2003 came to fruition with the political crisis in Haiti and the hurricane season in 2004. These crises made the countries take a good look at their internal systems for coping with disasters and realize that they need assistance to set up a system within their country disaster plans to deal with mass migration emergencies. The seminar was well received, with participating government officials urging one another not to be complacent and to put structures in place to respond to mass migrations, as they realized that their country could be affected by such a crisis next.

3. In part due to UNHCR,s and IOM efforts, and in part due to the events earlier this year, government representatives who expressed little interest in developing contingency plans of mass migration two years ago, were now sharing recommendations with other Caribbean countries, identifying shortcomings in planning preparedness, and even recommending that the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Response Agency (CDERA) add plans for mass migration to its contingency plan for natural disaster. At the same time, these countries are keenly aware of their limited resources and capacities, not only to develop such plans but more importantly to absorb and deal with a real crisis.

4. Several panel discussions revolved around the experiences of Caribbean countries affected by the Haitian crisis earlier this year. Participants benefited from hearing the very real situations confronted by the various agencies and services of the receiving countries. In discussions on effective management of crises, participants identified some existing strengths in internal coordination and networking, in meeting basic needs, in status determination, and regional agreements and exchanges. Areas of weakness included lack of legislation, cultural and language barriers, and the fact that more than a few migrants quickly becomes a crisis. Again, the issue of preparedness and potential impact of dealing with what would seem to be small number of in-coming migrants, underlined the need for capacity building assistance for these small island nations.

5. Delegates also had a chance to participate in workshops focused on issues such as public health related to mass migration, the protection of migrant workers, border security, refugee status determination and the quality of asylum during separate workshop sessions. Participants engaged in role-play, sub-regional working groups to discuss tools for effective management and protection during mixed migratory flows.

6. Strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for improvement on response mechanisms were addressed. Delegates identified

the need to coordinate not only on a regional basis but also internally within their own governments. Many agreed there were no mechanisms in place for a quick response. Although Haiti and Grenada were used as case studies for most of the discussions, governments agreed that similar situations could occur in their own countries. This realization that influx could potentially happen to nearly any Caribbean country and the need to prepare for it, is exactly the result the USG hoped for in supporting these joint IOM/UNHCR seminars over the past few years. Other migration issues such as refugees/asylum seekers, legal/illegal migrants, trafficking victims, and smuggled migrants were also on the agenda. Although the countries involved recognized that they had come along way since last year,s seminar, they also realized that they still have a long way to go before they are able to manage migration within their region. Delegates, conscious of the connection between migration management and national/regional security, requested continuing assistance and training from UNHCR and IOM to manage their own borders while recognizing the human rights of refugees and migrants.

Common Themes

17. Common themes and concerns emerged over the course of the conference from several of the countries across the region. Although many of the countries in the southeastern region of the Caribbean do not face the same fears of massive influxes of Haitian migrants, even small numbers of illegal migrants can still wreak havoc on these tiny island nations. Several countries described the migration to their countries as a trickle8 Delegates seemed to agree that part of their emergency action plans for natural disasters need to include instructions on how to handle detained migrants.

18. Examples of common concerns regarding migration were varied dependent upon the location of the country, and the likelihood for mass influxes. Nevertheless, most topics were of interest to all delegates. Multiple participants queried the panels for insight on whether or not to use schools for shelters during a mass influx of migrants or a natural disaster, as this often causes long delays in the opening of schools. Many delegates also voiced concern over how to handle migrants who are known to have criminal records. The prohibitive cost of establishing temporary housing for migrants and their repatriation is overwhelming to small island nations.

Who Participated?

19. The seminar welcomed the current Consul General from U.S. Consulate Monterey, Luis Moreno, who recently completed his tour as DCM in Port au Prince. CG Moreno has considerable experience with migration issues in the region, and shared his insights on the panel involving early warning and monitoring systems. In addition, he was able to answer some of the questions and comments put forth by the Cuban delegates to the conference with regards to bilateral migration agreements by saying there are no formal arrangements, but the U.S. makes semi-regular repatriations to Cuba in coordination with the Interest Section in Havana. The United States Coast Guard also sent a spokesman, Orsini Louis, the Assistant Chief of the Law Enforcement Office, to discuss the reception and registration of migrants on Coast Guard cutters in the Caribbean. U.S. Embassy officials and PRM program officers also attended the seminar.

110. Representatives from twenty countries in the region were present at this conference to share their country,s experience with migration. Although questions and conversations gravitated to the topic of outflows of Haitians through certain countries to the United States, all participants took away valuable information on how to manage the needs and the costs of illegal migrants. Perhaps the most important aspects of this seminar were to raise awareness of the variety of issues that need to be addressed before the migrant arrives, and it also formed an informal network for the delegates to contact one another for information sharing.

111. In his opening statement, Vincent Peet, Minister of Labor and Immigration welcomed everyone to the seminar co-organized by IOM and UNHCR and which benefited from the assistance of the Bahamian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Department of Immigration and Disaster Planning represented by the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA). Minister Peet spoke of the rise in international migration and the urgency to address the impact of this trend on national economies, the need to develop contingency plans for mass outflows, concerns for refugee and asylum seekers, the challenges of border management and security (biometrics), and the highly disturbing phenomenon of trafficking in persons. He highlighted the long-standing relationship of the Bahamas with UNHCR and IOM. UNHCR has worked closely with The Bahamas on matters pertaining to potential asylum seekers and refugees, and detainees in the Detention Center. IOM has several capacity-building

migration management projects underway in the Bahamas, and has assisted the Bahamas with the voluntary repatriation of a number of Asian and African nationals. IOM,s support resulted in the Bahamas application for full IOM membership, which was approved at the eighty-eighth session of the IOM Council in Geneva, on November 30, 2004.

Plea for Haiti Speech

12. At the end of the seminar, Haiti,s Ambassador Louis Harold Joseph requested floor time to address the participants. He thanked nations and international organizations for intervening in Haiti to help stabilize the country and to bring aid to the victims of the floods and hurricanes. He spoke of the Haitian government's awareness of the potential problems caused by sudden exodus of Haitian nationals to other countries in the region, as well as Haiti,s commitment to respect commitments made by previous governments on migratory issues. Ambassador Joseph said that while insecurity in Haiti is often attributed to political strife, it is important to stress that it also finds roots in social and economic problems such as urban banditry, drug trafficking, and the despair of unemployed youth. He noted that Haiti has seen no significant growth in twenty-five years, while population grows at an annual rate of 1.5% (life expectancy is 53 years, infant mortality is 8%, HIV/AIDS affects 5% of the population, and only 68% of the children benefit from primary education). He concluded by saying that while the democratic process is under way in Haiti with renewed dialogue among government, political parties and civil society, success is contingent on the realization of promises made by the international community to assist Haiti.

Visit to Nassau Detention Center

13. Political Officer, PRM program officers, CG Moreno, UNHCR and IOM staff took a tour of the controversial migrant detention center in Nassau during a break from the conference. The detention center has been criticized in Amnesty International reports and other human rights organizations for inhumane practices and human rights abuses in the past year. (See Reftels). Although there were no obvious signs of abuse, the center does suffer from lack of funding and possible mismanagement. The female detainees complained about the inadequate provision of meals and the lack of milk for the children. Some Cuban women were pleading not to be returned to Cuba. While lack of timely meals was brought up by and echoed by several detainees, as well as unwillingness to be returned, there was no mention of beatings. The water purification project funded by the Ambassador,s Fund was not yet completed at the time of the visit due to an additional need for a water pump. The government officials at the facility believed that they could provide the contractors with a used water pump to improve the system.

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